



## **Relationship study seeks to strengthen Airmen and their families**

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“Up-Armor your relationship!” the brochure reads. It is language military members understand, usually in conjunction with combat readiness. This time, it’s about marriage.

Because marriage and significant other relationship well-being is such an integral part of a healthy person, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base’s 711<sup>th</sup> Human Performance wing has partnered with Clark University in a study designed to assess just how much of a difference the state of a significant relationship makes to the overall health, happiness, and readiness of an Airman. The study will also research practical ways to make relationship health care part of the overall health care plan of Airmen.

The study is part of the Air Force’s expanding efforts to strengthen the resiliency of Airmen and their families.

In its pilot stage at Wright-Patterson AFB, the study integrates a “Marriage Checkup” into a participating Airman’s primary care clinic visit. Under the guidance of trained behavioral health consultants, participants engage in a few thirty-minute assessment and feedback sessions that focus on the strengths and concerns in a couple’s relationship and conclude with suggestions on how the couple might actively strengthen their relationship.

The Marriage Checkup concept was developed by Clark University’s James Cordova, a professor of psychology who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Washington and has been conducting research, publishing, and training couples therapists for over fifteen years. His concept was first introduced in 2008 with the publication of his book, “The Marriage Checkup: A Scientific Program for Sustaining and Strengthening Marital Health.”

“I developed the Marriage Checkup to do for relationships what regular physical and dental checkups have done for physical and dental health,” he said.

According to Cordova, military members have “unique stressors” in their relationships, primarily due to frequent deployments in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and New Dawn. The challenges of deployment are shared by an Airman’s family. This is underscored in a 2009 study completed by Air Force clinical psychologist Lt. Col. Jeffrey Cigrang of the U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine. The study found that nearly 31 percent of Airmen who reported being married or



in a committed romantic relationship at pre-deployment indicated at post-deployment that they or their partner had filed for divorce or taken steps to end the relationship.

Cordova has partnered with Cigrang to help the 711<sup>th</sup> Human Performance Wing get the program off the ground at Wright-Patterson AFB. Cigrang heard Cordova present the program at a national psychology conference and was intrigued.

“The idea of a ‘checkup’ seemed to fit very well in a primary care environment, and so we talked on a number of occasions about how to do that,” Cigrang said.

The challenge is adapting therapy meant for lengthy sessions into the fast-paced environment of a military primary health clinic, added Cigrang.

Cigrang’s team has already developed a primary care treatment plan for post-traumatic stress disorder, so he felt the Marriage Checkup study would succeed, too.

The study focuses on several questions: Will behavioral health providers find it easy to implement? Will couples come to primary care for this type of program? Will couples find it useful?

Cordova said that even a brief encounter with a trained relationship health consultant has positive and lasting effects on the health of a relationship.

“In previous studies, we have shown significant improvement in marital health across the board, from basic relationship satisfaction, to improvements in intimacy, acceptance, and partners taking active and loving care of each other in their relationships,” he said.

“For such a brief checkup, the size and sustainability of relationship health improvements have been quite surprising,” he added.

In a recent study, it was found that people who experienced high relationship angst were also more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression, increasing the risk of a major depressive episode by 10 to 25 percent. According to Cordova, this fits with reports from the deployed setting that home front stressors exceeded combat exposure and peer/unit stressors as the most common factor leading to combat stress clinic visits.

“Clearly there are opportunities for improvement in our strategies for reaching Airmen and their partners with effective resources for ‘up-armoring’ relationships,” said Cordova.

The Marriage Checkup for Airmen is specifically tailored with content that addresses the particular challenges military families face.



Couples participating in the study will be the primary indicators of how well a fully integrated program would work. According to Cigrang, if the feedback is positive, his research group will consider asking for further funding from the Air Force for a larger, more definitive study.

“Recruitment of participants may be a challenge,” he said. “This is a new and novel approach to support Air Force marriages. We are looking for couples where one or both are active duty to take the marriage checkup and then give us feedback on what they think.

“Our hope is to allow loving couples to maintain strong, healthy, and happy relationships for a lifetime. We are excited about this opportunity to test the Checkup with Airmen and their partners to help keep Air Force families strong and support the mission of the Air Force,” said Cordova.

For more information about the study or to participate, contact 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Crystal Pinkley at (937) 938-3828 or by email at [crystal.pinkley.2@us.af.mil](mailto:crystal.pinkley.2@us.af.mil).